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Scottish Socialist Alliance

Members Update
May 1998
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Alliance Annual Conference

Sat 20 June 10.30 am

Glasgow City Halls, Albion St

Our 1998 Annual Conference will be taking decisions on questions crucial to the future of socialist organisation in Scotland.

The April Alliance National Council, decided that the Annual Conference should focus on 2 main issues:

- it should come to a decision on whether or not the SSA should back an independent Socialist Scotland
- it should decide whether or not the SSA should continue promoting discussions on forming a new Scottish Socialist Party (with a projected launch date of early autumn).

See the enclosed Pre-Conference Discussion Papers. The 17 May National Council meeting will discuss more specific motions for Conference.

1998 Membership Card

Members who have paid for 1998 should have a new new membership card by now. No new green card means, according to our records, you have yet to pay for 1998. Please do so right away - monthly rates £2 waged; /£1 low waged; 0.50p unwaged.

Please support both these events

Demonstrate
End Slave Labour for a decent minimum wage for all over 16

Sunday 14 June 12 noon

George Square, Glasgow

The Government Low Pay Commission is soon to report on the minimum wage. Reports suggest a poor £3.50 hourly rate leaving millions in poverty. Even worse, trainees of all ages and workers under 26 could be excluded. The Alliance calls for a minimum wage based on the European Decency Threshold of £6 per hour. At the very least there should be no retreat from the £4.62 demanded by the STUC and many unions. So far the demo is co-sponsored by the SSA, Scottish FBU, Glaciers AEEU Stewards, Motherwell RMT & Liverpool Dockers Stewards.

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Scottish Socialist Alliance

Pre-Conference Discussion Papers

For an independent socialist Scotland

Two discussion papers:-

- **Independence**
- **New Party?**

The case for the Alliance backing an independent socialist Scotland

The Scottish Socialist Alliance was founded on the twin principles of socialism and internationalism. Both of these principles are inseparable from one another. Free market capitalism is incompatible with genuine internationalism. As global economic power becomes increasingly concentrated in the hands of a cabal of transnational corporations, individual nation states are forced into ever more vicious competition for crumbs from the table.

Each government waves its own little begging bowl under the noses of the multinationals, hoping desperately to attract inward investment by offering cheap labour, 'flexible' working practices, low taxes, lavish subsidies and generous profits
As the new millennium approaches, national chauvinism, racism and ethnic conflict flourish like poisonous plants in a toxic waste dump.

Ultimately, only the world-wide victory of socialism can bring about genuine international collaboration involving the integration and sharing of the resources of the planet, the abolition of starvation and poverty, the removal of ethnic conflict, and the creation of a safe, clean and healthy global environment.

Socialism and Internationalism

Socialism is therefore a pre-requisite of genuine internationalism. At the same time, internationalism is a pre-requisite of genuine socialism. It is simply not possible to build and sustain an oasis of socialism in the middle of a world-wide capitalist desert. Even the most industrially advanced countries of the world would be unable to survive indefinitely as isolated outposts of socialism, shut off in permanent quarantine from the rest of world.

Internationalism is not an optional extra for socialists, like a preference for sugar in coffee. It is a central pillar of our entire philosophy. However, the struggle for socialism internationally will not erupt simultaneously across the globe. Nor will it unfold evenly and uniformly. Because of differing traditions and conditions it will tend to evolve in a more fragmented and disjointed manner, with events in one country spreading rapidly to neighbouring countries. That was precisely the fear of the US government in the 1980s when it imposed an economic blockade and threatened full-scale military intervention against tiny Nicaragua, a country with the half the population of Scotland.

Thus internationalism has to be built first and foremost at local and national level, whilst spreading internationally outwards. There is no contradiction between these two tasks.

Nor is there necessarily a contradiction between standing for the break up of an existing multi-national state such as the United Kingdom; and defending the unity of the working class across national borders.

For socialists in Scotland, the debate on independence is not a debate between nationalism and internationalism: it is a debate over how best to advance the struggle for socialism in Scotland and internationally in this period.

Until recently, it was possible for the Scottish Socialist Alliance to advance an open-ended policy on the national question which elucidated our support for the national rights of the people of Scotland while maintaining in effect a neutral position on the question of independence.

However, since the overwhelming referendum vote in favour of a Scottish Parliament, the debate on the future of Scotland and whether it should remain part of the British state has become increasingly polarised. In this new political climate, the SSA now has to take a more clear cut stance on the question of Scottish independence without compromising or diluting our socialist principles or our internationalist outlook.

Significant Groundswell

It is clear that there is a significant groundswell of opinion in favour of an independent Scotland. Sometimes socialists have to be prepared to swim against the tide of popular sentiment. If for, example, support for independence essentially represented a backward, right wing trend in society, an isolationist or xenophophobic development, the Scottish Socialist Alliance would be fully justified in standing out against this mood.

However, that is clearly not the case. Although there are reactionary anti-English currents in Scotland today which socialists should vehemently oppose, the predominant character of this movement of public opinion in favour of Scottish independence is progressive. The sections of society who favour Scottish independence are those who are generally more socialist-leaning, including a big majority of young people and low paid workers.

In contrast those layers who intransigently oppose independence include the most right wing, conservative sections of the population, in particular the Scottish ruling class of landowners, financiers and big business interests.

The demand for independence reflects a desire by ordinary people for greater democracy and control over decision making in the face of global capitalism. It represents resistance to the naked free market Thatcherite agenda of the London-based political parties. And it expresses a feeling that by breaking free of the British state, it would be easier for Scotland to evolve towards a more egalitarian society.

Socialist Direction

The Scottish Socialist Alliance has an opportunity to channel that vague yearning for change in a more consciously socialist direction.

However, in order to achieve that aim, it is essential that we avoid any appearance of equivocation on the issue of independence. Over and over again, the question will be posed: Is the SSA in favour of independence? If we refuse to answer this question clearly, or if we appear evasive or indecisive on the issue, our ability to win over to the programme of socialism young people and other radicalised sections of the working class will be seriously undermined.

On the other hand, and unambiguous policy socialist Scotland would enable the SSA to stand out clearly as the most radical and combative political force in Scotland today. This means adopting clear a cut policy in favour of a socialist independent Scotland.

Such a policy would enable the SSA to more effectively contrast our vision of the future with New Labour's feeble semi-parliament and the SNPs programme of a free market capitalist Scotland with low rates of corporation tax.

Support for independence should not be mechanically equated with support for separatism, isolationism or nationalism. Nationalism is a specific political philosophy which preaches solidarity on the basis of the nation. Independence is not a synonym for separate. The dictionary definition of independence is "free from external control". It is the opposite of dependence. At the same time, the SSA should emphasise our support for maximum working class unity across national borders; for the maintenance of existing all-Britain trade union structures, with greater autonomy for the Scottish sections of British trade unions; and for our long term goal of a wider alliance or confederation of socialist states on an all-European and ultimately a world-wide basis.

Break up British State

By adopting this broad policy, which combines support for the break up of the British state with a socialist and internationalist perspective, the SSA would be in a stronger position to combat the watered down Tory unionism of New Labour on the one side and the pseudo radical pro-free market nationalism of the SNP on the other.

Idealism of Young People

As well as campaigning programme of bread and butter policies on the issues which affect peoples' everyday lives, the SSA should also appeal to the idealism of young people especially, and attempt to inspire them with a radical new vision.

Instead of a Scotland dependent on Westminster and the multi-nationals, we stand for a Scotland whose wealth and resources are owned and democratically controlled by all. And instead of a Scotland which lives on its knees, pitifully begging for resources from Westminster or for inward investment from vampire multi-nationals, we stand for an independent socialist Scotland which will take the lead in an international fightback against global multinational capitalism.

Alan McCombes
Campaigns Coordinator

Scottish Socialist Alliance

Pre-Conference Discussion Papers

Time for a Scottish Socialist Party?

POLITICAL BACKDROP

Since the collapse of the authoritarian regimes in Eastern and CentralEurope and the lurch of social democracy towards neo liberal politics, socialists internationally have been regrouping on a new pluralist basis which includes socialists from a variety of traditions. However, we have of course still to respond to the rythmn and temp of domestic politics in assessing how to move forward.

Elections for the Scottish Parliament, along with Council and European elections, are less than one year away. These elections look likely to accelerate a process that has been underway for some time - a growing divergence between mainstream politics in England and in Scotland. In England the main debate is still between New Labour and an increasingly reactionary Conservative Party, with Tony Blair still riding high in opinion polls. Labour dominated Scotland during the Thatcher years but, paradoxically, now that it is in power at Westminster it's position in Scotland is under serious threat.

New Labour, especially in Scotland, is vulnerable to a challenge from the left. The people of Scotland consistently rejected monetarist policies under the Tories. Such policies are no more popular now. Hence, the rise of the SNP in opinion polls and in By Elections. This is not simply a 'protest vote'. It reflects a growing convergence between progressive economic and social demands with demands for independence. Trade unionists, pressure groups

and the public at large are all lining up with demands on the Scottish Parliament far in excess of it's limited devolved powers.

A POTENTIAL BREAKTHROUGH?

There is the potential for a left wing electoral breakthrough in 1999, especially as forms of Proportional Representation will be used for both the Scottish Parliamentary and European polls. Even under the traditional voting system for local elections, the Alliance could make some modest gains, especially where we have led opposition to Tory/Labour cuts. But disillusion with the mainstream parties is not enough. The radical left also needs to be seen by ordinary working people as a credible alternative.

STRENGTHS OF THE ALLIANCE

From the outset, the Alliance has advocated unity in action to help build a new credible radical force, drawing many socialists together from different traditions - ex Labour, ex SNP, SML, Communists, Greens and individual socialists and direct action activists.

The Alliance in campaigns against cuts and closures and in elections has made a modest, but significant, impact in many working class communities. Direct action, eg occupying schools and community centres, has succeeded in saving some vital local services.

On the electoral level, we have contested over 20 elections. For example in 3 Glasgow Council By Elections the average SSA vote has been around 10%. Even the 2.5% achieved across the 10 Glasgow seats in the difficult conditions of the General Election can be seen as a reasonable building block for the vote required (perhaps around 6%) for a seat in the Scottish Parliament. The Alliance has also stood in many other towns and cities, helping to prepare the ground for a nationwide challenge in 1999.

The Alliance has developed a healthy internal political culture that has moved beyond the negative and sectarian point scoring that has plagued the left for far too long. Yet, in a remarkably short time it has succeeded in building a common political outlook around the Charter for Socialist Change. The Alliance has proved that political pluralism in an open democratic structure can be successfully reconciled with unity in action on a principled programme. However, the Alliance recognises that it is still at the stage of preparing the ground for a more significant advance in the future.

LIMITATIONS OF LEFT UNITY

Although the Alliance has significantly extended left unity in Scotland, there are still many organised socialists outside, mainly in Labour or the SNP. Both the SLP and SWP, despite invitations, chose not to become part of the Alliance.

The Alliance has also tried to come to an arrangement with the Scottish Green Party and the SLP on electoral cooperation. The Alliance tried to persuade the Scottish Greens and the SLP that a united radical alternative to the mainstream parties would have better prospects than in a scenario, such as in the Paisley South By Election, where the radical vote is split. Unfortunately, the majority decision at the Scottish Green Conference in April 1998 was against any pact or deal for the 1999 elections. So far, Arthur Scargill has been strident in his opposition to any electoral cooperation and the Alliance has been unable to secure any electoral arrangement with the SLP in Scotland. However, exploratory talks did take place earlier this year and, hopefully, the SLP in Scotland will continue discussions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE ALLIANCE

There can be little dispute that the Alliance's internal organisation is fairly loose. Our branch structure, publications, fund raising and even individual membership all suffers from the duplication of time, energy and resources between the affiliated organisations and the Alliance itself. It is self evident that a unified party structure would allow a better organised and more coherent internal organisation to develop.

The Alliance has undoubtedly struck a chord with many activists who were tired of the sectarianism often associated with left politics. However, there is anecdotal

evidence that some socialists in the trade unions, Labour and the SNP are wary of the Alliance, viewing it as a loose collection of 'far left' groups. They believe the Alliance is unlikely to gain mass support or even to remain a stable organisation due to a tendency of left groups to be insular and self destructive. We should, of course, be aware that charges like this will be laid against the Alliance by many who have no intention whatsoever of building a socialist alternative of any description. Nevertheless, it is also possible that the broader appeal of the Alliance has been restricted by varying perceptions of 'a far left Alliance' as opposed to a new broad socialist party. A unified party structure may well be more attractive and accessible for people to join. This is perhaps the most important issue in deciding whether to move beyond the Alliance and work for the creation of a new Scottish Socialist Party. Would a new party be better placed to fill the political vacuum on the left? Not just to be more attractive to existing activists but to the increasing numbers of people, especially young people, becoming disillusioned with the establishment parties.

WHAT TYPE OF PARTY?

It is vital that the gains made by the Alliance should not be lost if moves were to be made towards a new party. Any new Scottish Socialist Party should adopt a mix of trade union, direct action and electoral politics. It should have a clear political programme in favour of a democratic planned socialist economy as opposed to the poverty, inequality and environmental destruction wreaked by the market economy. I would also argue (although this is a parallel debate) that it should back an independent socialist Scotland with an internationalist outlook.

Crucially, building on the positive experience of the Alliance, any new party must be open, democratic and pluralist. It should endeavour to foster the same atmosphere of tolerance and respect for different shades of socialist opinion that has developed within the Alliance. A 'best of both world's' structure would be required that generated the cohesion of a unitary party but also allowed members to organise and express viewpoints. There are European models that demonstrate that socialists can achieve this. For example, the PDS in Germany allows members organise around 'platforms' such as Green, Feminist, Lesbian & Gay, Marxist, Trotskyist etc. A range of networks can be a healthy source of ideas.

TIMING OF LAUNCHING A NEW PARTY

Some may argue that it is premature to move towards a party structure at the moment. However the most important factor is at any given moment to adopt the structure best suited to advancing socialism in Scotland. There would be a clear advantage for socialists in Scotland to have structures in place by the time of the 1999 elections. A party structure could also greatly benefit our campaigning profile through common publications and stronger branch functioning.

Therefore, should the SSA Conference accept that we should continue to promote discussions around the creation of a new Scottish Socialist Party, we should aim to have come to a conclusion by early autumn. Growing disillusion with New Labour, together with the opportunities presented in the 1999 elections, presents socialists with an opportunity of taking significant steps forward.

We should not just consider the case for a new party but a new type of party - a party that is socialist and green; a party that is for workers' rights and the rights of women and young people; a party that is for Scottish self government and internationalist; a party that is an effective campaigning force but also open, inclusive and pluralist. In short, we should consider helping to create the type of party relevant to the needs of the 21st century.

Allan Green,

SSA National Secretary

7 May 1998